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Tuesday, 28 August 2018, 9.30 a.m.

New York

President:	Ms. Pierce	(United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mrs. Cordova Soria
	China	Mr. Yao Shaojun
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Adom
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbengono
	Ethiopia	Ms. Guadey
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United States of America	Ms. Eckels-Currie

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/777)

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The meeting was called to order at 9.35 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/777)

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. John Ging, Director of Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2018/777, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018).

I now give the floor to Mr. Ging.

Mr. Ging: Last month, the Emergency Relief Coordinator informed the Security Council (see S/PV.8320) of the dramatic increase in the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Aleppo and Idlib governorates since the beginning of the year. Recent weeks have seen a further serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the north-west, with intense aerial bombardment and shelling reported in parts of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia governorates, resulting in the death and injury of civilians and damage to, and the destruction of, civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, thereby placing even more strain on humanitarian responders and vulnerable host communities.

On 10 August, there were air strikes on the town of Oram Al-Kubra, in western Aleppo, which were reported to have killed 41 civilians and wounded more than 70. On the same day, bombs were dropped on Alteh and Khan Shaykhun, in southern Idlib, killing 12 civilians and wounding dozens of others. On 12 August, 67 people were reportedly killed and 37 were injured, including many women and children, when a weapons depot in a residential building exploded near Sarmada, in rural Idlib.

Over the same period, the United Nations Children's Fund reported that three health facilities it had been supporting were attacked, rendering two of those facilities out of service. Separately, an unconfirmed report was received of a projectile striking the grounds of a hospital in Al-Ma'arra which had been deconflicted according to agreed procedures. In that instance, no casualties or damage to the hospital were reported. School activities were also suspended in several areas owing to hostilities.

Humanitarian organizations are responding to needs across the north-west while drawing on cross-border assistance deliveries, which continue to provide a critical lifeline for hundreds of thousands of civilians who cannot be reached through other means. Some 680,000 people received food delivered from Turkey during the month of July alone, while 254,000 people received health assistance during the same period.

Alongside the ongoing response and prepositioning of aid, humanitarian partners are finalizing a comprehensive readiness plan for people in areas of the north-west being reached by cross-border humanitarian organizations. The plan is intended to guide a flexible response over a six-month period, complementing assistance mobilized from inside Syria. With an estimated 2.1 million people already in need in areas under non-State armed group control covered by the readiness plan, with humanitarian workers likely to be among the displaced and with many organizations facing increasing funding shortfalls, the efforts of the Council to avoid a further escalation of violence and an ensuing humanitarian catastrophe are critical.

Turning to the situation in the south-west, the Government of Syria has now regained control over the vast majority of Dara'a, Quneitra and Al-Suwayda governorates. Large-scale return of internally displaced people has already taken place, and fewer than 60,000 people are now estimated to remain displaced across the three governorates.

However, massive levels of humanitarian need persist, and the United Nations continues to provide

aid in partnership with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other local organizations. Food assistance has now been provided to more than 390,000 people, as have water and sanitation, education, shelter assistance and protection services. Two ad hoc inter-agency convoys delivered hygiene kits, nutrition supplies and sanitary and household items for a total of 40,000 people in Dara'a's Al-Balad and Busra Al-Sham on 9 and 16 August, respectively. As efforts to scale up protection and basic services continue and more detailed needs assessments are also under way, sustained and expanded humanitarian access across the south-west will be critical.

The humanitarian situation remains complex and challenging in other parts of the country. At Rukban, on the Syrian-Jordanian border, the movement of several hundred families out of the camp due to deteriorating living conditions means that the current population is estimated to be approximately 45,000, of whom the vast majority are women and children. The provision of humanitarian assistance in the camp is increasingly urgent, with minimal aid delivered since January. Discussions on a humanitarian convoy to the area continue.

Close to 150,000 people are now estimated to have returned to Raqqa city. Unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices continue to pose a life-threatening threat to returnees and humanitarian personnel. Alongside the insecurity and resource shortfalls, this is hindering the scaling-up of assistance.

In Deir ez-Zor, ongoing fighting in the east of the governorate has continued to impact civilians, with reports of more than 20,000 people having been displaced to makeshift camps between July and the beginning of this month. Many sites hosting new arrivals are not accessible to humanitarian organizations present in the area, and most displaced people are reported to be prevented from leaving the sites, although some have been able to move to other areas to receive medical treatment.

The number of people who remain displaced from eastern Ghouta in sites in rural Damascus is reported to have fallen to just below 7,500. The United Nations did not receive authorization to access these sites between mid-June and August. However, the goods news is that visits to some of those locations were possible last week. Returns to eastern Ghouta are reported to have continued, although access to the area remains limited, delaying our efforts to scale up assistance and provide much-needed services in the area, including for returnees.

World Humanitarian Day was held on 19 August to pay tribute to aid workers and rally support for people affected by crises around the world. Syria remains among the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian workers and health-care providers. Many have been directly targeted in the course of their work or forced to flee their homes. Hundreds have lost their lives. We continue to remind all parties to the fighting in Syria of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect and respect humanitarian relief personnel.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator is in Damascus today to engage with the Government of Syria on how best to further scale up the collective humanitarian response across Syria and how to ensure that those in greatest need are assisted and protected. His visit coincides with a visit of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

The Council's engagement is also critical to ensuring de-escalation in Idlib and surrounding areas; to ensure safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access; and to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. Hundreds of thousands of people are already experiencing dire humanitarian conditions in overcrowded sites in which basic services have been stretched to the breaking point for months.

Humanitarian organizations are doing what they can with the resources available to them to sustain the current response and prepare for a possible further deterioration, thanks in large part to cross-border assistance and the generosity of our financial donors. But a worst-case scenario in Idlib would overwhelm capacities and have the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen in this crisis. We therefore call on the members of the Council to do all they can to ensure that we avoid that. In the words of Kofi Annan, "We have the means and the capacity to deal with our problems, if only we can find the political will."

The President: I thank Mr. Ging for his briefing.

I now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Orrenius Skau (Sweden): Speaking on behalf of the humanitarian penholders, I thank Mr. Ging for

his briefing and I pay tribute to the tireless efforts of humanitarian workers saving lives on the ground in Syria every day. Too many brave humanitarians have been killed on duty.

We meet today as there are alarming signs of a pending military offensive in north-western Syria. Over the past two weeks, we have already witnessed attacks on educational and health-care facilities, including three schools supported by UNICEF. In the first half of 2018, there were 38 reported attacks against health facilities in Idlib. These are clear violations of international humanitarian law.

All parties, including Syrian allies, need to be reminded of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian objects and comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and the avoidance of unnecessary suffering. Civilian areas, buildings dedicated to education, including schools, and hospitals and medical facilities must not be subject to direct attack or used for military purposes, and humanitarian and medical personnel must be respected and protected.

We note with deep regret the continued lack of implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), presented by Sweden and Kuwait and adopted unanimously by the Council some six months ago (see S/PV.8188). We stress that Security Council resolutions must be respected.

Idlib is a de-escalation area, established by the Astana guarantors. One after the other of the de-escalation areas has turned into escalation areas. Of the estimated 2.9 million people living in Idlib and surrounding areas, more than half of the population are internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom have already fled not only once, but several times, including from other de-escalation areas. A staggering 2.1 million people in Idlib and surrounding areas are in need of humanitarian assistance. Increased military escalation would have catastrophic consequences and could lead to a humanitarian disaster. We therefore urge all parties to abide by the de-escalation agreement in Idlib and call upon the Astana guarantors to uphold their commitments regarding de-escalation and humanitarian access. We must ensure that Idlib will not become the next Aleppo or eastern Ghouta.

We remain deeply concerned by the continued lack of humanitarian access. In the last reporting period, only four inter-agency convoys were dispatched. The Syrian authorities must be compelled to do more. We encourage those with influence and those who engage in dialogue with Damascus to step up advocacy for the signing of facilitation letters for convoys, United Nations regular programming to all areas, including areas that have recently changed control, and approval of visas for United Nations staff, including those of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We also note that the cross-border modality remains an absolute lifeline for the many people in need in Idlib, and commend the efforts of the United Nations and partner organizations in that regard.

In Syria, horrible war crimes continue to be perpetrated on a daily basis. Civilians, women and men alike, as well as children, continue to be targeted in blatant disregard for human life and dignity and in violation of international law. In the military operations to retake control of the south-west, indiscriminate aerial bombardment and artillery shelling, including against schools and hospitals, have frequently been used. We are also shocked by the attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in Suwayda on 25 July, such as the abduction of women and children. This highlights yet again the need for accountability, and we reiterate our full support for the Commission of Inquiry, as well as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

All displaced Syrians have the right to return, but the assessment of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is that conditions for the voluntary repatriation of Syrian refugees are not yet in place. It is the responsibility of the Syrian authorities to create an environment propitious for a safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and IDPs, in accordance with international law and the principle of non-refoulement. UNHCR has a clear mandate to protect refugees. The return of refugees and IDPs must be managed by the United Nations with all relevant parties, in line with international humanitarian law. We fully support the work of the United Nations, including UNCHR, and agree with its assessment. In this regard, we also express our continued concern regarding the Syrian Law No. 10.

Finally, we reiterate our support for a United Nations-facilitated political solution, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). That is the only way to ensure a sustainable solution to the crisis in Syria, to end the

suffering and to address the legitimate concerns of all Syrians. Furthermore, only once a credible political transition is firmly under way and when conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and IDPs are in place will the international donor community be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria.

To conclude, let me emphasize that Sweden and Kuwait have been significant donors to the Syria humanitarian response over the years and we will continue to contribute. As co-penholders, we will also continue to do our utmost to help alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people, remind the Syrian parties of their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law, and ensure that the Council upholds its responsibility in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome the holding of this meeting and thank Mr. John Ging for his valuable and informative briefing this morning.

Peru is following the situation in Syria with great concern. The conflict continues to claim lives and destroy civilian infrastructure. The sorely needed humanitarian assistance is still delivered only in a limited way. More than 13 million people — two out of three Syrians — need it. Our main focus at the moment is Idlib, a highly volatile scenario. The extreme vulnerability of nearly 4 million civilians should compel us to direct our attention to the need and responsibility to protect them. Under no circumstances can the fight against terrorism be used as an excuse to violate human rights and international humanitarian law, especially when, as in Idlib, the lives of approximately 2 million children are at stake.

It is essential to prevent a further escalation of violence. Its humanitarian impact is incalculable. It could lead to massive new refugee flows and further complicate regional stability. We are also concerned about the situation of nearly 5 million internally displaced persons and the 6 million Syrian citizens, who constitute the largest population of refugees and displaced persons in the world today. These people, who are in many cases exposed to the most precarious living conditions, have the right to return voluntarily to their homes and businesses, in a safe and dignified manner, under internationally accepted parameters. The right of ownership of these persons must not be undermined in any way.

More than ever, the tragic situation demands that the United Nations and other humanitarian actors have immediate, safe and unrestricted access to those most in need. We wish to reiterate our admiration of, and support for, the work of humanitarian workers. We also stress the importance of cross-border assistance for the survival of millions of people. The international community, and in particular the countries with the greatest resources and those committed to peace and stability, must ensure stable and predictable funding for the humanitarian response plan in Syria.

Finally, we must bear in mind the urgency of a political solution to this protracted conflict, based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). All parties, especially the Government, must engage constructively in those efforts. Our ability to ease the suffering of the population and to ensure the necessary and urgent rebuilding of the country ultimately depend upon it. In that regard, we hope that the upcoming meeting in Geneva between the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the Astana guarantors will enable progress in establishing a constitutional committee that is inclusive and representative, especially with regard to Syrian women. We believe it is essential that the Astana guarantors, other countries with influence over the Syrian Government, and the opposition contribute to an atmosphere of moderation, détente, dialogue in order to ensure peace, the well-being of the people of Syria and the territorial integrity of the country.

Ms. Eckels-Currie (United States of America): I thank Mr. John Ging for his briefing.

All eyes are now on north-western Syria, and we are gravely concerned about the threats to civilian lives should the regime and its allies undertake a wider offensive in Idlib province. Tensions are rising there, and so is the violence. In recent weeks alone, hundreds of civilians have already lost their lives, many of them women and children. Education authorities reportedly have suspended all school activities for several days in cities near Idlib due to hostilities. Syrian regime military operations in Idlib, particularly with Russian military support, would escalate the conflict and further undercut the Security Council's efforts to work towards a political solution to the conflict.

We are also profoundly troubled by reports that the regime is continuing its practice of targeting medical facilities, an egregious and ruthless tactic flagrantly in defiance of international humanitarian law and specifically in violation of resolution 2286 (2016). There is no excuse to claim ignorance about the locations of those facilities under the deconfliction mechanisms that are in place. Doing so only adds to the lies, crimes and countless accounts of human tragedy that have defined this conflict over the past seven years.

The United States takes seriously the warnings from Special Envoy of the Secretary-General De Mistura and the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator that a military operation in Idlib and surrounding areas would not only endanger the lives of many of the more than 3 million civilians sheltering there, but would also severely interfere with humanitarian partners' ability to deliver lifesaving assistance. Unless the Astana guarantors — Russia, Iran and Turkey — uphold their own established de-escalation zone in Idlib province to stop the regime's imminent assault, those civilians will have nowhere left to turn to seek safe refuge or aid.

The United States is also deeply concerned that the regime may again use chemical weapons against civilian populations as part of its assault on Idlib, with devastating consequences for humanitarian conditions on the ground and further eroding the international regime prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. As we made clear in our joint statement to commemorate the anniversary of the regime's deadly sarin gas attack in Ghouta, the United States and our allies, France and the United Kingdom, will respond appropriately to any new chemical-weapon attacks by the Al-Assad regime.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees assesses that conditions in Syria are not yet conducive for large-scale refugee returns. Despite the assessment of the United Nations, however, the Al-Assad regime has called on Syrians around the world to return home, but has done little to create the conditions necessary to make that a reality. In fact, the regime continues to make the country a threatening and dangerous place for its own people by routinely blocking United Nations cross-border humanitarian access, stalling the United Nations-led political process in Geneva and proceeding with air strikes and ground offensives — placing millions of civilians in peril.

As the leading donor of humanitarian assistance for Syria, the United States supports aid that reaches 4 million Syrians across all 14 governorates every month, and we will continue to provide that support to the Syrian people. If our Russian partners are serious about their concern for refugees and other displaced Syrians, we recommend that they stop enabling the Syrian regime's ongoing and indiscriminate violence, maintain the de-escalation areas and allow unhindered humanitarian access to those in need, in full accordance with resolution 2165 (2014).

The best and only durable solution to the humanitarian crisis in Syria is through a credible political process in Geneva that leads unalterably to constitutional reform, United Nations-supervised presidential and parliamentary elections and a political transition that genuinely reflects the will of the Syrian people, as well as accountability for human rights abuses committed during the conflict. Those goals often seem out of reach, but we owe it to the Syrian people to support every effort to make them a reality.

Mrs. Cordova Soria (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We very much appreciate and take note of the briefing by the Director of Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Ging.

We once again express our dismay that the people of Syria continues to live under siege and in violence, primarily the most vulnerable population, children, who in some cases have known only that reality their whole lives. We regret that, at the time of the presentation of the report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/777), as a result of the conflict approximately 1.48 million people were still living in hard-to-reach areas, and that among the more than 6 million internally displaced persons 2.6 million are children. We also regret that in July alone, in the south-west of Syria, up to 325,000 were displaced, thereby increasing the number of displaced persons of this already vulnerable population.

In that regard, we renew our appeal to the relevant parties and call for the cessation of hostilities in the context of resolution 2401 (2018). Any increase in tensions must be prevented so as not to cause greater instability in the region. We therefore reiterate our concern and alarm about what may happen not only in Aleppo province, but particularly in Idlib, since any use of force in that region can lead to, apart from mass population displacement, a greater humanitarian

catastrophe. We therefore draw attention to the fact that, in the month of July alone, the population in Idlib increased to 4.2 million people.

It is essential to avoid any kind of tension or escalation of violence in order to prevent a greater tragedy. To that end, the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) is crucial. In that regard, we highlight the various initiatives that made it possible to reach local agreements that facilitated not only the delivery of humanitarian assistance but also the evacuation of people in need, such as the populations of Fo'ah and Kafraya on 16 July.

Likewise, we highlight the delivery of supplies by France, which were transported to Syria with the support of the Russian Federation. That example should be repeated if we hope to reach the 13.1 million people who need assistance throughout Syrian territory. We are convinced that dialogue and cooperation are more effective than the use of violence.

We once again condemn any kind of indiscriminate attack on civilian installations. We call on the parties to respect their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law in order to ensure the protection of civilians, hospitals and educational facilities and not make such civilian infrastructure the target of their attacks, but particularly to have regard for and to protect medical and humanitarian personnel. We believe that only respect for international law and international humanitarian law will make it possible achieve a gradual sustainable peace in Syria.

We pay heartfelt tribute to humanitarian and medical personnel, whose tireless work, including risking their own lives, has enabled the much-needed humanitarian access. We urge the various humanitarian agencies not to stop such assistance, since, thanks to them, it has been possible to reach more than 3.3 million people with food and 1 million people with water, sanitation and hygiene services and supplies. In that regard, we emphasize that, in the month of July alone, more than 188,000 children and mothers received primary health-care and immunization services, while more than 193,000 children and nursing mothers received nutritional supplements and services. However, we particularly emphasize that it has been possible to provide protection and psychosocial support services to more than 209,000 children.

That is why we reiterate the need for cooperation on the part of the Syrian Government so that, working in a more coordinated and active way with the various United Nations agencies and their representatives, such assistance can be increased. That also urgently requires visa approvals, as well as authorization for the entry of convoys. We therefore highlight the dispatch of at least four cross-border convoys during the month of July. We urge that the delivery of humanitarian assistance through such inter-agency humanitarian convoys continue.

We insist on the need to ensure the clearing of explosive remnants of war throughout the territory and populated areas, in particular in Raqqa city. We believe that to be an urgent and essential task, not only since they threaten humanitarian activities but also because the necessary measures must be taken to prevent fatalities among medical staff, humanitarian workers and, in particular, civilians returning to their cities of origin. In that regard, we recall the fact that any return must be voluntary, unhindered, in full dignity and in safe conditions.

Finally, we reiterate that the only way to resolve the conflict is through an inclusive, negotiated and agreed political process, led by and for the Syrian people and which facilitates a peaceful solution.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): At the outset, allow me to thank our briefer, Mr. John Ging, for his comprehensive analysis.

First, let me very briefly underline once again our strong support for the relaunching of a United Nations-facilitated political process for Syria. We strongly support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned inclusive political process under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva.

Switching now to our main topic, namely, the humanitarian dimension of the Syrian conflict, we have to acknowledge that the military logic continues to drive developments in Syria. We still face unceasing and widespread violence and violations of international law, including gross and systematic human rights violations and abuses. The most striking examples of that are still visible in the south-western part of Syria. We are extremely worried by reports stating that by the end of this month, almost 200,000 people may be newly displaced in affected areas.

Taking into consideration the recent events, we strongly condemn the intensification of military operations and call for an immediate end to the violence

in south-western Syria. Military operations resulting in deaths among the civilian population, as well as the destruction of and damage to civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, are unacceptable and must stop. Safe and sustainable humanitarian access must be secured. Unfortunately, since the Syrian Government retook control of many areas of the country, there is still no unhindered access for humanitarian actors to the areas in need.

We are concerned about not only south-western Syria but also the north-western part. Military operations led by Government forces, with the support of its allies, have already displaced thousands of civilians. The total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Aleppo and Idlib governorates has increased by more than half a million this year.

As we heard in the briefing, Idlib governorate is still struggling with the new, significant influx of internally displaced persons. It is an extremely worrying pattern, which leaves Idlib with the highest total number of displaced persons in Syria. More than half a million people have been displaced to and within Idlib governorate in the past six months, mostly from eastern Ghouta, Homs, Yarmouk and other parts of Idlib governorate. Possible consequences of further military escalation in that area are of great concern to us.

The humanitarian imperative should be our priority. We would like to reiterate our strong call to all parties with some influence on the ground to take all the necessary actions to achieve a full cessation of hostilities in the whole territory of Syria, in particular in Idlib, in order to prevent scenarios already witnessed in eastern Ghouta and Aleppo. In that context, it should be emphasized that the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all sides to the conflict should be respected.

Let me also stress the need for the protection for refugees. We would support only the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Syrian people under a United Nations-led framework once conditions allow it. Respect for the imperative of non-refoulement should be our guiding principle in that matter.

There is no need to repeat the importance of the protection of groups in situations of vulnerability, especially children, women and members of religious minorities, who are far too often disproportionally affected by the conflict in Syria.

In conclusion, allow me to stress the necessity of maintaining the unity of the Security Council on the question of the full implementation of a humanitarian resolution across Syria. Unfortunately, we see a new military offensive persisting. That worries us, as we may again witness increased violence. We call on all parties that can affect events on the ground to take the steps necessary to ensure the cessation of hostilities, the adequate protection of the Syrian people and, finally, the provision of urgent humanitarian access.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): First of all, we would like to thank the Director of Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Ging, for his briefing, which once again highlighted the grave humanitarian situation in Syria and the risk of further deterioration if the regime launches a large-scale offensive in Idlib. It should be recalled that violence begets violence and that deadly cycle must cease. In that regard, I would like to make four points.

First, France is very concerned about the signs of a large-scale military offensive in Idlib. Such military action continues to undermine hopes for an end to the crisis and could spark another humanitarian tragedy in northern Syria, coupled with a migrant crisis in Turkey. The protection of civilians and infrastructure must be guaranteed, as the lives of 2.2 million people are at stake. Such violence would also exacerbate threats to regional security as it would cause jihadist combatants, including those in the Idlib region, to disperse. The increased bombings of recent weeks must cease immediately. Together, we must dissuade the Syrian regime from carrying out its strategy of crushing opposition and, in particular, using chemical weapons. That is the message France, along with its American and British partners, conveyed last week. In that regard, maintaining dialogue is essential and President Emmanuel Macron is in close contact with President Erdoğan and President Putin on that issue. We call on the guarantors of the Idlib de-escalation area to maintain the ceasefire and to fully respect and ensure respect for humanitarian law.

Secondly, more broadly, full, immediate and unhindered access must be guaranteed throughout Syria. Humanitarian workers must have safe access to all those in need, including in eastern Ghouta and Quneitra. France deplores the fact that no genuine progress has been achieved in that area, including in priority zones where control has changed hands. Only

11 per cent of convoy needs identified by the United Nations have been covered in July and August, which is insufficient and unacceptable. We recall that assistance provided by the cross-border convoys authorized by resolution 2393 (2017) is crucial. The assistance provided via Turkey is vital and no alternative exists for providing daily assistance to approximately 2 million people in north-western Syria. We also call for increased aid through Al-Yarubiyeh, between Iraq and Syria.

Thirdly, with regard to the return of refugees, at present conditions for their safe, dignified and voluntary return regrettably do not exist. If they should decide to return to Syria, their safety cannot be guaranteed. Since January, there have been nearly 1 million additional internally displaced persons. Those who return are vulnerable to expropriation, abuses, forced recruitment and even persecution by the regime. Law No. 10 makes the displacement of people irreversible and is part of a demographic engineering strategy. It is a major hindrance to the return of refugees and displaced people. Like our European Union partners collectively, we request a repeal of the law, reparations and in-depth work on the restitution of property and conscription.

Fourthly and lastly, I recall that the humanitarian situation will enjoy no long-term improvement without credible and irreversible progress in a United Nations-led political process. To date, the Syrian regime has demonstrated no willingness to negotiate a political transition. Without a political transition, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), national reconciliation will not take place and the majority of refugees will not return. We also recall very explicitly that without a genuine political transition, the States members and institutions of the European Union will not fund reconstruction.

In conclusion, we are at a crossroads on the path to a serious process that will lead to an inclusive political solution. France is working to bring together the parties to the conflict. The announcement by Mr. Staffan de Mistura on the formation of a constitutional committee is an opportunity we must take to ensure progress towards a political solution. France will continue its efforts to protect Syrian civilians and to ensure that the political process leads to genuine constitutional change and free, transparent and inclusive elections.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): First, let me express appreciation to Mr. Ging for his sobering briefing.

I will focus on three points today: the need to uphold international humanitarian law, in particular in Idlib; the conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees; and the need for a political process.

First, with regard to international humanitarian law and Idlib, we have continued to witness the consequences of intensified military action in Syria, especially last month in the south-west. Cross-border aid is needed to fulfil humanitarian needs in that area; sporadic deliveries from Damascus are not sufficient. We underline the need to uphold international humanitarian law and protect civilians, including aid workers and medical personnel. Even when hospitals provide their coordinates to receive protection, they are targeted from the air. Such practices reflect shocking disrespect for international law and human dignity and decency. The parties to the conflict should provide protection to all civilians, especially to those fleeing violence.

We share the concerns expressed in the Secretary General's report (S/2018/777) with regard to further military escalation in the north-west. Nearly 3 million civilians, including 1 million children, live in Idlib. Sixty per cent of them are internally displaced persons who have fled violence elsewhere in Syria and sought protection in the north-west. The Astana guarantors of the de-escalation area should provide such protection; that is their obligation under international humanitarian law. We urge the Syrian regime and the Astana guarantors to prevent an escalation of violence in Idlib. The Astana guarantors and the Syrian regime have to work towards a non-violent negotiated solution. Upcoming meetings, such as the Istanbul conference, should be used to find the solution. Parties need to refrain from military action.

Secondly, with regard to conditions for the safe return of refugees, Syrians — totalling approximately 5.6 million people — remain the largest group of refugees worldwide. We remain grateful to neighbouring countries for their hospitality and stress the importance of international support and solidarity. We appreciate the recent agreement on the humanitarian response plan, although it is long overdue. Like our Peruvian colleague, I would also highlight the dire plight of so many internally displaced persons. Once again, we stress the importance of a needs-based humanitarian approach in Syria, not just now but also in the coming year.

We are shocked by the recent publication of the death records of hundreds of Syrians who died in the regime's detention centres. We cannot talk about the safe return of refugees so long as the regime is not even prepared to protect its own citizens throughout Syria. It remains unsafe to return to Syria. The 21 protection thresholds, as defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and which we strongly support, are not in place. For any voluntary return, a safe political, social and economic environment needs to be ensured to enable refugees to return to their towns and villages and re-establish themselves in safety and dignity. In line with the principle of non-refoulement, guaranteeing voluntary returns is at the core of such a process. It is crucial that UNHCR and other protection actors have access to monitor compliance with the 21 protection thresholds.

Related to that issue, we still have serious concerns about Syrian Law No. 10. That law seems to attempt to construct new demographic realities on the ground and challenges the future of refugees and internally displaced persons alike.

Thirdly, a political solution is needed. The pursuit of a strategy based on military violence and the violation of civil rights will never bring long-term stability and peace. Syrians need to see that they can trust their own Government to bring peace. Ultimately, stability and peace can be created only through an inclusive political solution. The position of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is clear and consistent. We support a United Nations-facilitated political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015). There will be no reconstruction support for Syria as long as a political transition has not taken place.

In conclusion, let me echo the call from the Secretary-General's report:

> "[T]he perpetrators of serious violations of international humanitarian law must be held accountable. Such a step is central to achieving sustainable peace in the Syrian Arab Republic." (*S/2018/777, para. 45*)

In line with the Secretary-General, we call for the situation in the country to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Let me end with a word of respect and appreciation for aid workers and medical personnel who risk their own lives for the victims of the violence in Syria.

Mr. Adom (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes this briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. I thank Mr. John Ging, Director of Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, whose briefing informed us about the continuing humanitarian challenges, linked in particular to the ongoing hostilities between the parties to the conflict in Syria. In that regard, the warning of an imminent Syrian offensive against Idlib only increases our concern.

Despite the unanimous adoption by the Security Council of resolution 2401 (2018), the long-awaited stable humanitarian pause, indispensable for the delivery of humanitarian aid, including medical evacuations, is unfortunately struggling to materialize. I recall that the resolution called on all parties to cease hostilities in order to create the conditions necessary for unrestricted and sustainable access by United Nations humanitarian convoys to the besieged areas in order to put an end to the plight of millions of Syrians.

Unfortunately, despite the Council's urgent appeals, military clashes are still ongoing, as indicated in the Secretary-General's report (S/2018/777), and the escalation of violence spares neither schools nor hospitals. They are contributing thereby to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria. In the north-west of the country, the report states that the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib has increased by more than 570,000 since early 2018, reaching a total of 4.2 million. Thousands of evacuees from the south-west have been transported to Idlib — a town that recorded the arrival of nearly 130,000 displaced people between March and August. The worrisome deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria is further exacerbated by the difficulties encountered by humanitarian actors in assisting populations in distress.

In that particularly difficult environment, where humanitarian actors are risking their lives to restore hope to millions of Syrians, Côte d'Ivoire would like to commend the courageous actions taken for the return of some 147,000 civilians to Raqqa city since the end of hostilities in October 2017, despite the spread of explosive remnants of war in that city. My country also welcomes the continued cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance by the United Nations and its specialized agencies, which has helped more than 3.3 million people in need.

In view of the deteriorating humanitarian situation, Côte d'Ivoire recalls that it is incumbent on the warring parties in the Syrian crisis to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. It urges them in particular to refrain from impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid. It endorses the Secretary-General's appeal to all parties to the conflict, Syrian civil society and all other actors to cooperate fully with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic, with a view to conducting the necessary investigations and bringing to justice before international courts those who have committed serious crimes under international law since March 2011.

The lack of consensus in the Council on the Syrian issue further exacerbates the impasse in the political process and jeopardizes the chances of a negotiated way out of the Syrian conflict. In that context, the joint humanitarian operation conducted by Russia and France appears to us to be a model of cooperation that should be welcomed and repeated. That project enabled the supply of essential medical equipment to 500 seriously wounded and 15,000 lightly wounded persons in eastern Ghouta. My delegation therefore urges the members of the Council to consider all forms of cooperation in support of the fundamental right of the Syrian people to health, education and well-being.

Côte d'Ivoire encourages Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the political process in Syria, to spare no effort to maintain the momentum of consultations with a view to achieving further progress in the implementation of the Sochi final statement and the establishment of a Syrian-led constitutional committee, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the informal consultations of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General with high-level representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and Turkey at the Astana process meeting in Sochi on 30 and 31 July. My country remains convinced that the just and lasting peace that our Council wishes to see in Syria must be the outcome of a political process based on inclusive and constructive dialogue.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, I would like to express my delegation's appreciation to Mr. John Ging, Director of Operations and Advocacy of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), for his informative briefing. We once again commend the OCHA teams for their tireless efforts to alleviate the suffering of millions of Syrian civilians.

Equatorial Guinea joins previous delegations in expressing its deep concern over the ongoing hostilities in several provinces in the south-west and north-west of Syria. We condemn the terrible attacks of recent weeks in various parts of the country on civilians and civilian and humanitarian infrastructure in north-western Syria, which have claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians, many of them women and children, in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo.

The civilian population should not and must not continue to be the victim and target of military operations. In that regard, we call on all parties and those with influence over them to ensure safe, unhindered and sustained humanitarian assistance to civilians and the protection of civilian infrastructure, in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Syria is one of the most challenging and dangerous environments for humanitarian workers. Since the onset of the crisis in March 2011, hundreds of humanitarian workers and service providers, including health workers, are estimated to have been killed in the line of duty. It is therefore urgent that all necessary measures be taken to increase their protection and ensure the continuity of services in support of an effective humanitarian response to people in need.

In Idlib and surrounding areas, the threat of an escalation of violence, similar to that seen in other parts of Syria, will not only endanger many of the more than 3 million civilians surviving in that densely populated area, but will also seriously affect the ability of humanitarian partners to deliver life-saving assistance, and will ultimately become a genuine source of destabilization for the region.

As we have reiterated, the humanitarian situation cannot be addressed in isolation from the political process. In that regard, it is essential that all parties to the conflict and those with influence over them reach a genuine and inclusive agreement so as to resolve this protracted war peacefully and to avoid further suffering of the Syrian people. We also reiterate our firm commitment to the inclusive political process

under the auspices of the United Nations, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

Lastly, we hope that the talks scheduled for early September in Geneva with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General will create the conditions necessary to achieve a lasting solution to the conflict, which will lead inevitably to the country's needed reconstruction and breathe new life into its economy thanks to the financial contributions of its strategic partners.

Ms. Guadey (Ethiopia): We thank Director John Ging for his briefing. We reiterate our appreciation to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for continuing to provide life-saving assistance to millions of Syrians in challenging circumstances.

We note from the report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/777) that the United Nations no longer categorizes any area in Syria as besieged. In addition, the number of displaced people has decreased significantly, particularly in south-west Syria. While the return of refugees and internally displaced persons in some parts of Syria could be taken as a positive trend, we understand that humanitarian needs remain at a high level. Therefore, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners should be supported by all parties so that they can reach all Syrians in need of assistance.

In that regard, we stress that safe, timely, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to people in need throughout the country remains indispensable. The protection of civilians and civilian facilities is also critical. In addition to supporting an effective humanitarian response, the protection of aid workers should be afforded special attention. In order to continue need-based humanitarian programmes, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners also require sufficient and predictable funding for the Syria humanitarian assistance response plan.

We are concerned that further military escalation in Idlib and surrounding areas, where nearly 3 million Syrians reside, could aggravate the humanitarian crisis. The report of the Secretary-General clearly cautions that increased military escalation in that area would not only trigger further massive population movements, but also have catastrophic consequences for civilians in terms of protection and access to humanitarian assistance and basic services. As Idlib is one of the de-escalation zones, we encourage the Astana guarantors — who, we acknowledge, had a meeting late last month — to abide by the de-escalation agreement and find a sustainable solution through dialogue that could protect civilians in that area.

The Council — particularly those members that have influence over local actors — should also play a constructive role in avoiding military measures that could have a huge impact on civilians. As the Secretary-General reminds us in his latest report, we all should have only one agenda — to end the continued and enormous suffering of the people of Syria. It is only a Syrian-owned, comprehensive and political solution facilitated by the United Nations that could sustainably end the humanitarian tragedy. Therefore, all efforts should be made to accelerate progress on the political track.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we thank Mr. John Ging for his valuable briefing and we commend the efforts made by all humanitarian workers in Syria and elsewhere in the world. On behalf of the State of Kuwait, I would also like to endorse statement delivered by the representative of Sweden. However, I have additional points that I would like to briefly address.

The province of Idlib, which is inhabited by nearly 3 million people, is in the spotlight as a result of various reports pointing to a potential military escalation there. Any escalation would undoubtedly exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and we urge everybody to abide by the de-escalation agreement. The military option in Idlib would have disastrous humanitarian consequences, especially in light of the fact that half of its population is made up of internally displaced persons. In addition, millions of people in Idlib and the neighbouring areas are in need of humanitarian assistance. Diplomatic efforts must therefore be stepped up by all actors at the highest level to avoid bloody battle and further bloodshed, so as to prevent the recurrence of the disasters that occurred in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta.

We are convinced that the cross-border assistance mechanism constitutes a vital part of the humanitarian assistance in Syria, where millions rely on that machinery, which was able to deliver humanitarian assistance to more than 600,000 people in July. That bears witness to its effectiveness and importance and to the need to renew its mandate in due time.

Millions of Syrians have been displaced during the past few years as a result of the war and the deliberate destruction of residential areas and vital infrastructure

such as roads, hospitals and schools, as well as violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. All Syrian refugees have the right to go back to their homes, and we reiterate what we have said previously and what the Secretary-General of the United Nations has said in his monthly report about the need for safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees to their homes.

The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, is currently visiting Syria, and we hope to see more cooperation from the Syrian authorities with the United Nations and its specialized humanitarian agencies by allowing unhindered and effective humanitarian access to help all people in need in Syria. In that context, we recall that six months ago the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401 (2018), calling for an immediate ceasefire, the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of injured persons. Unfortunately, however, that resolution has not been effectively implemented on the ground. It is frustrating that resolutions that are not implemented are useless and cannot help innocent civilians. History will not forget the Security Council's inability to shoulder its responsibilities for putting an end to flagrant violations of human rights and international humanitarian law throughout the Syrian crisis and to ensure accountability.

In conclusion, we all need to step up our efforts to make further tangible progress on the issue of Syria. We hope that the high-level diplomacy which we have seen recently will lead to a comprehensive settlement, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). The settlement must be approved by all components of the Syrian people and meet their legitimate aspirations, while preserving the unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria.

Mr. Yao Shaojun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China thanks Director John Ging for his briefing. We have taken note of the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/777) on the cross-border humanitarian assistance.

Currently, the Syrian humanitarian situation continues to face challenges. Parties in Syria must proceed while considering the future of the country and its people's welfare, abide by the Council's resolutions and resolve differences through dialogue and consultations so as to immediately alleviate the humanitarian situation. The United Nations and the international community must step up communication and cooperation with the Government and support all regions in need of assistance within Syrian territory. At the same time, humanitarian assistance in Syria must be fully consistent with the principles of neutrality, impartiality and non-politicization, while based on respecting the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

We have also taken note of the reported ongoing returns of some Syrian refugees and displaced persons. People can be hopeful and long-term peace and stability in Syria can be fully guaranteed only when steady progress has been made in rebuilding the country. The international community must actively support Syrian reconstruction, including stepping up efforts to clear landmines, improvised explosive devices and other explosive remnants of war, in order to pave the way for the return of refugees and displaced persons.

Terrorist organizations continue to threaten the security of Syrian people. We must bolster the progress made in counter-terrorism and prevent the resurgence of terrorist organizations. The international community must consistently enhance its cooperation and resolutey combat all terrorist organizations on the Security Council's list so as to maintain regional stability and security.

We must step up efforts to promote a political settlement of the Syrian issue in order to fundamentally address the humanitarian situation in Syria. The international community must come together to support both the United Nations as the primary mediator and the efforts of Special Envoy De Mistura to advance the political process based on the principle of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process and resolution 2254 (2015). The Security Council must remain united on the Syrian humanitarian issue and provide conditions for a political settlement.

Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan, Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian issue, visited Syria and countries of the region in late July. He held a further exchange of views with the parties concerned and played a constructive and active role in the political settlement of the Syrian issue.

China takes the humanitarian situation in Syria seriously and has been contributing to alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. In May, China hosted a workshop on the development and rebuilding of Syria. In July, at the opening session of the eighth Ministerial

Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, President Xi Jinping announced that China would provide another ¥600 million to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and other countries for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction on the ground. China will continue to do its utmost to assist Syria and its neighbours that have been affected by the refugee issue.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We thank Director of Operations and Advocacy of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Ging, for his briefing on the very critical humanitarian situation in Syria.

We have carefully studied the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions (S/2018/777). We are closely following developments on the ground and are aware of the dire humanitarian situation. Only by ensuring the safe, sustained and unimpeded access for the United Nations to people in need throughout the country, across conflict lines and in areas that have recently changed control will we be able to prevent further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis. We pay tribute to the United Nations system and its humanitarian partners for their work in the dangerous humanitarian operations in Syria, which are unprecedented in their magnitude and scale.

The political negotiation process is difficult but, as is said, diplomacy is the art of the possible. We must not lose hope that a political agreement between the parties to the conflict, as well as between the main players, will soon be achieved.

We welcome the outcomes of the international meeting in Sochi, held in the framework of the Astana talks, where all parties to the negotiations agreed to the basic postulates of peace, in particular creating the conditions to set up a constitutional committee in Geneva.

We consider the return of internally displaced persons to their homes and the return of Syrian refugees in neighbouring and European countries to their homeland as very pressing issues. We hope that the new constitutional committee for Syria, which is being established under United Nations auspices, will play an important role in that regard.

Supporting and maintaining the new momentum and creating new conditions for peace should be our priority, instead of saber rattling or undertaking military interventions, which could derail everything that has been achieved so far. Peace, not war, should be our dictum.

Lastly, Kazakhstan believes that Syria's State institutions should be preserved and helped to grow along democratic lines, with proper rule of law. The destruction of statehood or attempts to forcible change it will only add to the chaos, as we see with the consequences of nearly eight years of fighting. We also endorse the Secretary-General's call on all parties to ensure that all the necessary security guarantees are in place for the continued delivery of services to the south, which must be carried out in an impartial manner and without distinction.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Ging for his briefing.

The situation has stabilized in many areas in Syria. The authorities are creating the conditions for a dignified and safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons. The Syrian Government has called on its citizens to come home and participate in rebuilding the country after the devastating conflict. It has provided security and safety guarantees. Law Number 10, as Damascus has continued to explain, is not aimed at undermining property rights. A series of measures was developed to streamline passport and customs control, social and medical care, training and employment assistance, and preferential lending.

At the same time, with the support of Russian experts, there are efforts under way to demine, clear rubble and repair infrastructure. A total of 93 medical and 226 educational institutions have been restored; 318 kilometres of roads have been repaired; 242 kilometres of electrical transmission lines have been laid; 88 electricity substations have been made operational; and 72 water supply facilities, two oil wells and two fuel and energy complexes were commissioned. In 118 towns in the provinces of Aleppo, Damascus, Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, Hama and Homs, work is under way to restore 82 schools, 56 preschools, 58 bakeries, 59 pumping stations, 54 electricity substations, 50 medical facilities and more than 500 houses.

Russia has established a centre in Syria for receiving, processing and housing refugees in the country, which provides information about towns that are ready to receive people. The process of the return of Syrians to their homes is gaining momentum. In total, since September 2015, more than 238,000 refugees

have returned to Syria from abroad, as well as more than 1.2 million internally displaced persons. Starting in July this year, more than 9,000 refugees, first and foremost from Lebanon and Jordan, have returned. Reception centres have been established in 412 towns in order to place almost 1.5 million individuals.

It is clear that efforts to support Syrians in restoring damaged infrastructure must be stepped up. Making artificial demands that will only complicate that process is unacceptable. It is high time to heed United Nations assessments about the detrimental impact of unilateral sanctions on the lives of ordinary Syrians and to refrain from such inhumane measures.

The United Nations, especially the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, should play an important role in the process of the return of Syrians to their homes. So far that Office has adopted a fairly passive position, possibly because of an internal United Nations directive that was developed at the end of last year by the Department of Political Affairs without consulting with Member States. That directive does indeed exist, despite clumsy attempts to refute that fact. It impedes the involvement of United Nations agencies in efforts to rebuild Syria until political changes are in effect in that country. What does that remind us of? It is, word for word, the well-known politicized position of the key Western countries, which the Secretariat has, for some reason, adopted as the final word. This irresponsible approach, which runs counter to the neutral posture of the United Nations, must be immediately reviewed.

At the same time, we were surprised by the extent to which the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expeditiously provided assistance to the White Helmet activists in Jordan who had been evacuated from Syrian territory by their sponsors. It would seem that ordinary Syrians who want to return home do not deserve assistance, whereas those who abet extremists by pretending to be humanitarian actors are welcomed with open arms. Such double standards undermine the credibility of our international Organization.

We agree that the situation in Idlib deserves close attention. The priority task continues to be separating the moderate opposition from the terrorists. In Idlib, we see concentrated forces of Jabhat al-Nusra that are attempting to lead and direct other groups, including those that are interested in national reconciliation. The terrorists have detained more than 2,000 "unreliable" individuals, who are suspected of wishing to reach an agreement with Syrian authorities.

We are seeing constant provocations against the Syrian Army and innocent civilians in areas abutting de-escalation zones. In August alone, the positions of the Government forces were shelled 383 times by mortars, anti-aircraft batteries and heavy-calibre machine guns. Twenty-one soldiers and 10 civilians were killed. The residential neighbourhoods of Aleppo have also been shelled. We have shot down 45 drones launched at the Khmeimim air base. Such drones are not limited to reconnaissance; they sometimes carry an explosive payload. Those practices will be countered.

We call on the commanders of illegal armed groups to refrain from provocations and to embark on the path of peaceful settlement. That option is still available. However, the current status quo is unacceptable. In violation of Syrian sovereignty, the United States has illegally set up the Al-Tanf military air base in the south of the country in the security zone where the Rukban refugee camp is located. There, hundreds of terrorists from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra feel quite safe and they carry out raids against liberated areas. Delivery of humanitarian aid to that camp has not yet been set up. We hope that this situation will be resolved.

Unfortunately, in the report of Secretary General (S/2018/777), the situation in the area around Rukban is not given adequate consideration. Furthermore, the essentially neocolonial policy to divide the country has continued, while in north-eastern Syria, with the support of the coalition, quasi-State structures that have pledged allegiance to the coalition have been established. We are seeing increasing numbers of military sites of the occupying Powers that are part of the coalition. There is clear evidence of a consolidated terrorist presence in the country that is attempting to secure control over the country's resources. That runs counter to statements that the only goal of the military presence is to combat ISIL.

The July meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria (see S/PV.8320) focused on the protection of children. Some delegations said all the right words about the priority tasks, including the psychological rehabilitation of children and ensuring normal conditions for their return to school. That was encouraging and we began to ask colleagues what steps they intended to

take in order to help Syrian children. To our surprise, it seemed that they had no such plans. In other words, the goal was simply to draw attention to the issue. Making noise and making a show of appearing humane to the audience is not necessary. The Syrians understand their problems better than anyone else. What is necessary is concrete assistance.

Before the start of the meeting, you made the following statement to the press, Madam President. I will quote it in part.

> "We all remember the risk of possible chemical attacks. All of these issues will be discussed during the Security Council meeting. The Russian Ministry of Defence has made a statement on this subject. I believe that this is an incredibly fake story, even by the standards of Russian propaganda. Those statements by the Ministry of Defence are absurd and comical. We are not preparing any chemical attacks. We think it would be best if the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Russian Government were to use their influence to convince Al-Assad not to use chemical weapons and not to attack his own population."

The Russian Ministry of Defence is not in the habit of issuing fake, absurd and comical statements. Maybe other countries' Ministries of Defence are wont to do that, but certainly not the Russian one. If our Ministry of Defence makes a statement, it does so based on concrete facts. Let me tell the Council a bit about that statement and leave it to members to decide whether or not it is comical.

In Syria, another provocation is being prepared with the use of chemical weapons. Terrorists associated with Jabhat al-Nusra who have occupied Idlib province are interested in stopping the Government army and are counting on further actions of intimidation by the United States and its allies against Damascus. It is hard to consider it a mere coincidence that the most loathsome leaders of the terrorists — Al-Baghdadi and Al-Julani — have recently made appearances in the news. According to reliable information, two large-capacity trucks arrived in the area of Saraqib from the village of Afs, accompanied by eight employees of the White Helmets. At the point of arrival, they were met by two high-ranking Ahrar al-Sham commanders. The White Helmets delivered a large volume of toxic substances to a warehouse for weapons and combustible lubricating materials located in Saraqib. Later, some of the chemicals, contained in unmarked plastic barrels, were transferred to small vehicles and transported to another militant base in the southern part of Idlib province. Eight containers of chlorine were delivered to the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughur. After the cargo was transferred to fighters affiliated with Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, they were transported to the village of Halluz, where they were met by a special group that was supposed to stage a delivery of first aid to victims of chemical weapons. The Syrian side has informed the members of the Security Council and the Committee established pursuant to resolution 1540 (2004) about this issue. The group underwent training in the handling of chemical weapons, under the leadership of the specialists of the British private security company Olive. With the active participation of Western intelligence agencies, the provocation is meant to serve as a pretext for the Western troika to conduct missile and air strikes against the military infrastructure of Syria, as it has done in the past.

We have all heard statements at the highest political level in Washington, D.C., London and Paris about the readiness to respond forcefully to chemical weapons. They are also threatening even broader actions, probably forgetting that following the April aggression, they stated that the alleged chemical potential of the regime at the time had been completely destroyed. It is not by chance that the destroyer *USS The Sullivans* arrived in the Persian Gulf, armed with 56 cruise missiles, or that a United States Air Force bomber, armed with 24 air-to-surface cruise missiles, arrived at the Al-Udeid air base in Qatar. In other words, we are being warned.

At the same time, Arab news networks have aired reports that cases of terrorist child abduction from villages in Idlib province have increased. These children will probably be used for the staged episodes directed by the White Helmets and funded by their Western sponsors.

The Syrian armed forces have no chemical weapon and have no plans to use such weapons. There is no military need to do so. We have stated that repeatedly. People in their right minds would not use means that are useless from a military point of view, as that would trigger reprisals from three major Powers. However, publicizing those plans and awaiting the provocation of militants could unleash such strikes. I am grateful for the warning about these developments. We in turn wish to warn that we are fully aware of those unsavoury plans and we strongly suggest that they be scrapped.

Carrying out such plans will deliver a further blow against a peaceful resolution in Syria, but the guerrillas who are being protected will not help.

We see how certain Western countries are more openly supporting Jabhat Al-Nusra and shielding the terrorists. The issue of chemicals is being crudely manipulated to pressure Damascus and its allies, and the sabre-rattling is intended to resolve internal domestic measures instead of reserving that energy to achieve a political settlement, fight terrorists and promote post-war reconstruction.

The President: Protocol requires me to thank the Russian representative for his statement. I will turn to some of his allegations in a moment. In my capacity as President, may I remind members of the Security Council and other speakers of presidential note S/2017/507 and that they should keep their remarks to a maximum of five minutes.

I will now speak in my national capacity — and I will certainly do that.

I would like to join other speakers in thanking John Ging and paying tribute to humanitarian workers: they work in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. I also want to reject the allegations we have just heard against the Department for Political Affairs. To the best of my knowledge, everybody in the United Nations is trying to do their best for the people of Syria and for the political process.

I think it is clear from everything we have heard today that the situation, especially in Idlib, is dire. All of the purported achievements on the list read out by the Russian representative are chimera. They will not help the people of Idlib. There are 3 million civilians at risk in Idlib, and yet the Syrian regime is escalating its military action against them. I would be grateful to know which forces have been relocated to Idlib, and I would like to say that we will hold the commanders responsible for attacks on civilians.

I would also like to echo the words of the representatives of the United States and France. The United Kingdom, too, will respond appropriately if the Al-Assad regime repeats its illegal use of chemical weapons, which has already had such devastating humanitarian consequences for the Syrian population.

I have three questions relating to the humanitarian situation. They centre around the fact that United Nations convoys have not had access to 6,000 internally displaced persons in Damascus and eastern Ghouta for two months, that 1 million people remain in hard-to-reach areas, where only 11 per cent of inter-agency convoys are able to conduct needs assessments and deliver aid, and that the United Nations continues not to be given the necessary security assurances so that humanitarian convoys can go through the Al-Ramtha border crossing from Jordan, which is in violation, as we have heard, of resolution 2393 (2017). I hope the Syrian representative will be able to give us an explanation in his remarks.

The Russian representative referred to refugees going home. I think the ongoing military operations, the lack of humanitarian access, the bombing of schools, the arbitrary arrests and the bombing of hospitals show exactly why the situation is not right for refugees to go home en masse.

Mr. Ging stated that Idlib represented a scale that we have not yet seen. We are used to superlatives when it comes to Syria, and we are used to them being surpassed. He also mentioned Kofi Annan, and, like others, I think the best tribute we can offer Mr. Annan is to continue our efforts to accelerate the political process and bring peace to Syria.

I do want to make a point reconstruction. As our Syrian colleague set out, and as echoed by every European Union member State and by the United States, there will be no reconstruction assistance until there is a credible and ongoing political process. There will not be a Marshall Plan for Syria; there will not be a Brussels plan for Syria. If there is any plan, it will appear to be in Moscow and a Putin plan.

I would now like to turn to some of the other statements made by the Russian Ambassador. The Russian Ministry of Defense today gave a briefing in which it said — and this has been echoed by members of his own Mission — that the United Kingdom and the White Helmets were involved in preparing chemical-weapons attacks against the Syrian people. I did not use the word "comical" in my press briefing. What I said was that, even by the egregious standards of Russian propaganda, this is an extraordinary allegation. It is wholly untrue. And it has been denied by the commander of the British forces in Kuwait, who is supporting the coalition. I am happy to repeat that denial now. And I am happy to rebut any allegation that the British Government or British forces engage with terrorists on the ground in Syria.

The only plausible explanation we have a for why these stories are being floated at the time, other than to increase the amount of fake news in the system, is as a smoke screen for a possible impending attack by the Syrian regime once again against its own people in Idlib. I repeat the statement that I, the French and the Americans made earlier about responding appropriately: we have no information about chlorine being delivered and, therefore, if the Russian Ministry does have that, the most probable explanation is that it as a pre-emptive attempt to set the agenda and the narrative for an appalling attack to come. I would appeal to Russia to use all its persuasive powers to convince the Syrian authorities not to attack their own population and never again to use prohibited chemical weapons.

I would draw the Council's attention to the fact that we have had a letter from the Syrian authorities about warning of an impending attack. I would recall for the Council that, on 10 March, the Syrian authorities wrote to the Security Council to warn of a chemical attack in eastern Ghouta, and one month later, on 10 April, such an attack took place and is attributed to the Syrian authorities.

I repeat again our abhorrence of chemical weapons. And I repeat gain that the British Government will always uphold its commitment to prohibit the use of such weapons and work with our international partners to ensure that that prohibition is upheld.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to thank you, Madam President, for mentioning the two letters we sent to the President and members of the Security Council on the chemical issue and the very serious risk concerning the possible use of chemical weapons again in Idlib.

You asked me some questions, Madam President, and I hope that the presidency will be patient enough and listen to my responses for several minutes, given that I have listened to all the members of the Council for over an hour and a half. There are several important points requiring explanation that I shall mention before reading out my statement.

First, during the period in which the report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was written, the Foreign Ministry approved 2,700 requests from the World Food Programme to provide assistance to liberated areas and others. The Foreign Ministry confirmed that it approved 2,700 requests.

Secondly, this month we have provided a detailed explanation to the members of the Council and Member States about the meaning and purposes of Law Number 10, which clearly refutes all the prejudiced and fallacious claims and information made by some about that Law. Hence, this topic should be withdrawn from circulation.

Thirdly, the Syrian Red Crescent continues to work, repeatedly and daily, with its local and international humanitarian partners to provide assistance. Dozens of convoys have arrived in areas where the inhabitants are in need of such assistance. Our problem with OCHA is as follows. Mr. Ging said earlier that only four convoys had been given approval by the Government. That is not true. Our problem with OCHA is that it counts only its own convoys. For example, it does not count convoys from the World Food Programme or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It does not count Red Cross convoys either. Therefore, thousands of convoys and tons of assistance are being delivered to areas where it is needed without being counted by OCHA. Again, according to OCHA only four convoys were given access this month. That is not true. This erroneous information misleads the members of the Security Council.

We have warned numerous times about the presence of a huge, unruly elephant in the Chamber that imperils our joint work and steps with its huge feet over many facts in order to cover the violations perpetrated against the Charter of the United Nations and international law by certain permanent members.

Apparently, the policies and practices of Western Governments against my country still contiue. Instead of shouldering the political and legal responsibility for waging a terrorist war against Syria and its people, and instead of correcting the disastrous policies against our region in general, and against my country, Syria, in particular, those Governments are insisting on their policy of aggression while using their black banners, White Helmets and red lines. They are currently preparing another staged bloody chemical-weapons incident in the north-west of Syria. The goal is to hinder the current political process and justify aggression by

Western countries in the Council against my country so as to occupy parts of our territory and strengthen the remnants of terrorist groups operating in certain areas.

My Government condemns the statement made a few days ago by the United States, France and the United Kingdom. It rejects both the content and format of that statement. Syria has repeatedly underscored that it considers the use of chemical weapons as immoral, and condemns their use anywhere, under any circumstances and against whomsoever. Syria once again reiterates that it does not possess any chemical weapons, and has lived up to all its obligations with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which has informed international bodies and the Council that Syria has lived up to its obligations in that regard. It is futile to have to repeat at every meeting that the Syrian chemical stockpiles were destroyed on the United States vessel *MV Cape Ray* in the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, we await the approval of the Council for the destruction of Israeli stockpiles of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

I would like to make available to the Security Council documented information about preparations by terrorists from the Al-Nusra Front and affiliated groups to use chemical weapons against civilians in Idlib in order to then accuse Syrian forces and thereby justify military aggression by the Governments that support those terrorist groups — as was the case during the American aggression against Al-Shouayrat airport on 7 April 2017, and the tripartite American-British-French aggression on 14 April 2018.

As to the preparations for committing this crime, we strongly call on those countries with influence over the terrorist groups to forbid them from committing it. I would recall that eight containers of chlorine were transferred to the village of Hallouz in Idlib as part of preparations for this new staged incident of chemical aggression. Terrorists related to the Islamic Party of Turkistan and the Al-Nusra Front, whom the drafters of the Secretariat's reports refer to as "non-State military opposition", are planning to use toxic chemical substances against Syrian civilians, including dozens of children who were kidnapped few days ago in Aleppo and Idlib countryside in order to then accuse the Syrian Government and justify an aggression against it.

Any act of aggression against my country, if it happens, is an act of aggression against a founding Member of the United Nations, as well as aggression against international peace and security. It would constitute support for terrorism and target the efforts we have made with our allies to combat it. Of course, what goes around comes around.

I shall limit my statement to that, given your request, Madam President, although this is a very important meeting that concerns my country. Yet everyone else took the floor for quite a long time.

The President: I again remind everyone of the existence of presidential note S/2017/507. We return to the issue of Syria every month. That is plenty of time for people to make their points.

There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite colleagues to come to the Consultations Room for informal consultations on two subjects.

The meeting rose at 11.15 a.m.